

Rome restricts founder of priestly order who was accused of abuses: Controversial priest to refrain from ministry

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The controversial founder of a powerful traditional Catholic order was a favorite of the late Pope John Paul II, but the Vatican under a new pope has disciplined Marcial Maciel Degollado, who faced multiple accusations of sexual abuse.

Maciel, 86, founder of the Legionaries of Christ (or Legion of Christ), has been asked to refrain from public ministry, limiting himself to “life reserved to prayer and penitence,” and Maciel has agreed to comply. The Mexican-born priest retired last year and lives in Rome.

The Holy See said on May 19 that Cardinal William Levada, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which oversees the Vatican’s response to sex abuse, acted with Pope Benedict XVI’s approval and decided not to formally sanction Maciel because of his age.

The decision marks the end of a drawn-out investigation into Maciel that appeared, at times, to test the Holy See’s willingness to reprimand a cleric honored by John Paul II. Maciel and his work were lauded at a public papal audience November 30, 2004, a date that marked the 60th anniversary of the priest’s ordination.

The organization’s secrecy has long frustrated critics, but its staunch loyalty to the papacy and great success in recruiting priests endeared Maciel to John Paul II, who had Maciel at his side on four papal trips to Mexico. The late pontiff praised him as an “efficacious guide to youth.”

Maciel founded the Legion of Christ in 1941. The conservative group, which is now based in Connecticut and which publishes the *National Catholic Register*, claims

about 600 priests and 2,500 seminarians worldwide, including at least 75 priests in the United States.

In 1997, nine former Legionaries accused Maciel of sexually abusing them decades ago when they were training to become priests in his order. The allegations sparked a Vatican investigation conducted by the office of then-cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Benedict XVI) that began in 1998 and ended late last year, after stalling in 1999.

One alleged victim, ex-priest Juan Vaca, director of the Legion's American headquarters from 1971 to 1976, accused Maciel of sexual abuse in a letter to the pope in 1978, according to Jason Berry and Gerald Renner, authors of a book on Maciel and pedophilia among priests.

The alleged abuses extended back to the mid-1940s and into the early 1960s when Maciel was in charge of training young boys and seminarians for church service.

The Legion posted a response to the Holy See's statement on its Web site, indicating that Maciel had accepted the pontiff's decision with a "spirit of obedience to the church." In facing the accusations against him, the statement said, "he declared his innocence and, following the example of Jesus Christ, decided not to defend himself in any way."

Speaking for the seminarians who brought charges, Alejandro Espinosa Alcalá said he was "jumping for joy" at the Vatican announcement. "I never thought the Vatican would decide to take such a significant step," he told the *New York Times*. "We told the truth and Maciel was lying."

Leading U.S. Catholic conservatives, including Richard John Neuhaus, George Weigel and William Donohue, wrote testimonials defending Maciel in 2002 on the Legion's Web site. Neuhaus, a priest convert from Lutheranism who edits *First Things* magazine, said to the *Times* May 19 that there is "nothing in the Vatican statement that suggests that the word *penance* is meant as a punitive measure."

That was not how critics interpreted the action. David Clohessy, national director of the Chicago-based Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests (SNAP), emphasized that the Maciel case illustrates the need for victims to persevere with their allegations, saying it took "decades [for victims] to finally be heard and get vindication." -*Religion News Service, other sources*